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ABSTRACT

The Greek immigrant student finds adjustment to the American education system difficult and bewildering. This paper reveals the cultural and educational background of the immigrant so teachers may better understand student behavior and thereby help the foreign student through the transition period. In Greece, education is a privilege of the wealthy or intellectual, and access to secondary education is narrow. In the Greek family, a closely knit patriarchal unit, the majority of children end their education at grade six and find a job to supplement the family income. Primary schools, comprised of six grades, are compulsory and free. The one-room school environment is formal and authoritarian. Secondary and private schools are confined primarily to Athens and a few provincial centers. Secondary education consists of the six-year gymnasia, preparing students for professional roles and higher education, and a few privately operated technical/vocational schools. Higher education is offered at two universities, two poly technical institutes, several technical schools, and teacher training colleges. Related documents are SO 003 443 and SO 003 447. (SJM)

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Education and Greece

Rosemary Chapman

May, 1969

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EDUCATION AND GREECE

Take the Greek child sitting over there in your classroom. Does his behaviour ever puzzle you, set you to wondering what makes him tick? You may wonder about his background, his family, the kind of place where he was brought up, the sort of school he went to in his home town or village. This paper is an attempt to answer some of these questions.

Background

Where has he come from?

Like most Greek immigrants to Canada, Nikos was born and brought up in a rural setting, perhaps a little fishing community on the coast, or an isolated village perched high up on the mountainside. His father may have been a fisherman, or a shepherd, or he may have been the village baker or carpenter. Nikos would come home after school to help his father mend the nets or look after the sheep and goats, and his sister would help their mother with the household chores. She may have gone to draw water from the village well, or looked after her younger brothers and sisters while her mother prepared the evening meal. There were few conveniences in their home, perhaps not even running water or electricity; life was simple, and often hard.

The Greeks have a legend of the creation which runs that when God made the world he shook the earth through a sieve; some countries were formed from the earth, but the stones that were left in the sieve were thrown away and these became Greece (Mead, 1955). The country is

extremely mountainous, the land dry and rocky and only about 25% is arable. In spite of the poor soil, more than half of the Greek population of 8½ million live in a rural area or in a small village of less than 5,000 people, and coax a living from the land (Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 1968). Small wonder that families such as Nikos' have chosen to seek a more secure and richer life overseas, with better opportunities of education and training for their children. In 1967 alone, 10,650 Greeks emigrated to Canada, the vast majority with a similar kind of background as Nikos and his family.

Background and Early Education

When does he go to school?

Imagine that Nikos lived in a small mountain village in the southern area of Greece known as the Pelopennese. It is very unlikely that there would be any kindergarten in the village. Pre-primary education in Greece is optional and confined to Athens and other large towns so that it is only available to a small number of children living in these areas.[1] Nikos, then, would start school when he was six, in the free and compulsory six-grade primary school which is universal throughout Greece. He would stay there until he was 12 or, if he failed any of the examinations which he had to pass at the end of each year in order to go on to the next grade, he might stay on until he was 14. For the first four grades, examinations are oral, after that they are written. His school probably consisted of only one room, and one teacher, with all ages and grades learning together. The blackboard was probably the only visual aid in the school, and Nikos might have to share a textbook with his neighbour. There would be no

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1 In 1961, according to The Mediterranean Regional Project, there were only 1,089 kindergartens in Greece, attended by just over 40,000 children.

television in his school, or in his home, and in all probability not even a library in the village.

What did he learn?

The school year runs from the second week in September to the end of June, with two-week breaks at Christmas and Easter. Schools operate on a six-day week although the numerous religious and national holidays reduce the weekly average to just over five days. Nikos' school day would start at 8:00 a.m. or 8:30 a.m. and generally finish by 1:30 p.m. or 2:00 p.m., but he would have homework to do and both his parents and his teacher expected him to work hard. He would learn Greek, not the classical language but the popular form which is spoken today, history and geography, natural history, arithmetic and physics, drawing and singing, gymnastics, and religion. Religion is taught throughout the school system, although the non-Orthodox minorities are free to follow their own faith. About 97% of the Greek people belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, so that being Greek and belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church are considered almost one and the same thing (Antonakaki, 1955). Orthodoxy with all its ritual observances, processions and feast-days appears to be an unquestioned part of the Greek way of life, accepted and practised almost casually.

There is no second language in primary schools, and if Nikos did not go on to secondary school, he would have no chance of learning any English before coming to Canada. Even at the secondary stage, where French or English is introduced, there is little time devoted to it and the emphasis is on the grammatical and written aspects of the language rather than on the oral. It is even less likely that Nikos' parents would have learned English; the vast majority of Greek immigrants arrive in

Canada without any English at all and they, like the Chinese, have to face the added problem of adapting to our alphabet.

How was he taught?

Nikos is used to being strictly disciplined both at home and at school; if he talked to his friend in class he could expect to be punished twice, once by his teacher and again by his father when he found out. He would be told that he had disgraced his family. Lessons tended to be strictly structured and Nikos was expected to keep his eyes on his teacher or his textbook, and not to speak unless he was asked to stand up and answer a question. According to one source, copying from a neighbour's book is not so reprehensible as being found out, and Nikos was more likely to be called stupid for being caught than dishonest for trying to copy (Graves, 1962).

What was his teacher like?

Nikos' teacher tended to be a rather remote figure of authority and a highly respected member of the community. She was a secondary school graduate who had been to teachers' college for two to three years. There is very little pedagogical training in the course, and in the isolated rural areas, teachers tend to get out of touch with new ideas. They are appointed by the Ministry of Education, and may be sent to posts in any part of the country. It seems, from talks with members of the Greek community in Toronto, that the most outstanding students from teachers' college are offered the most prized posts in Athens, so that the smaller and more remote Nikos' village, the less likely he would be to have a first-class teacher, that is, first-class in terms of college examinations and assessment.

Suppose that Nikos has finished his period of compulsory schooling in the village school and has, like most of his friends, got his primary school

certificate.[2] He would be 12 or, if he was not particularly bright or had not worked as hard as he should have he has had to repeat one or two grades, he might be 14. There would most probably be no secondary school in his village, and although his parents valued education highly and wanted Nikos to continue his education, there were his other brothers and sisters to think of and the travelling expenses involved in sending Nikos to the nearest secondary school, or even of having him live away from home, might be beyond their means. If this was the case, Nikos' formal education was at an end. He would go home to help his father and, when he was 14 and if other work was available, he would be allowed to take a job. the decision to leave school would be made and accepted, and if at this stage Nikos' parents decided to emigrate to Canada, it would be hard for either Nikos or his parents to understand why, since he is already integrated into the adult world of work, he should be expected to return to school until he is 16 and his family to do without his contribution to their earnings.

Family Life

Life at Home

Nikos is expected to help his family financially as soon as he can, and it is important to understand just how strong and extensive his family ties are. The Greek family, particularly in rural areas, is an extensive and very closely-knit unit. Nikos has loyalties and responsibilities not only to his parents, but also to his grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. These ties may loosen with marriage, time, or distance, but the individual and his family never cease to have a claim on each other.

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2 In 1961, 98% of children aged six enrolled in primary school, and of these, 87% completed the course and gained the primary school certificate (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

The behaviour of an individual reflects on the honour of the family, and if the child does something wrong, the whole family feels the disgrace. If Nikos was given the chance of going on to secondary school and later of getting a good job, he would be expected to do all he could, financially and through the influence of his position, to reciprocate the sacrifices made by the rest of the family.

This Cretan folk song sums up the situation very well:

> "I do not envy others for their vineyards and their gardens,
> I envy only those who can stay in one place
> And most I envy those who have brothers and first cousins
> To grieve with them and rejoice with them
> And to help each other if anything befalls"
>
> (Mead, 1955)

A child is absorbed into a family group from the moment he is born, and almost all his activities will be contained within the family unit. For instance, although Western custom has probably taken over amongst immigrants, a Greek child does not celebrate his birthday. Instead, the birthday of the saint after whom the child is named is the date celebrated, and the child is not the focus of attention, but the whole family share the celebration (Mead, 1955).

Nikos is loved and protected, but strictly disciplined. His father is the ultimate authority figure, but Nikos is also expected to obey his older brothers. His sisters are even more strictly supervised, and many immigrant parents in Canada do not allow their daughters to go out with boys or to go to parties, unless escorted by a brother or male member of the family.

Pride in Independence

If any trait can be claimed as specifically Greek, it is pride in independence, and loyalty within the family group, which shows itself

in a high degree of co-operation amongst relatives, even distant ones, and converse feelings of hostility towards outsiders.[3] The more primitive and isolated the community, the stronger those feelings are.[4] It seems that a Greek feels himself a member of a family first, a member of his village second, and a Greek third. The mountainous nature of the country, the lack of easy communication, differences in dialect and historical background between communities, differences between city Greeks and peasants, have all strengthened and helped to preserve this spirit of independence. This attitude is much truer of rural Greeks than of the city-dwellers who share Western materialist values; the Greeks who choose to emigrate are exceptional compared to most of the countrymen they have left behind, in that they are actively seeking a higher standard of living, modern conveniences and possessions, but the values of loyalty to the family and independence within it are not so easily shaken off and must be understood when working with the Greek immigrant child. For example, it is very hard for a child whose family needs his earning power to go against his parents' wishes and stay on at school.

Another aspect of this independent spirit is that the government tends to be seen as an impersonal, remote-control authority, whose laws are an interference and a threat to personal freedom. Before the political centralization of Greece, the village school teacher was a highly respected person, but he is now seen as a representative of remote, interfering control and, as such, has forfeited much of his former loyalty and respect. Amongst

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3 Information about national traits has been drawn from interviews with Greeks in Toronto as well as from the section on Greece in Cultural Patterns and Technical Change. Edited by Margaret Mead, New York: New American Library, 1955.

4 A detailed sociological study on these and other aspects of the Greek character has been made by J. K. Campbell in Honour, Family and Patronage (A Study of Instruction and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community). London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Greek parents here, the child belongs to his family when he is not in school, and any outside authority coming into the home may be viewed with suspicion or even resentment.

It should be remembered that the Greek people are deeply attached to their way of life, however much in need of change it may be in terms of modern technology and economics. There may be some communities who refuse to have running water in their homes, not because they cannot afford it, but because they do not want to deprive their women of the social visit to the fountain (Mead, 1955).

Women in rural areas and from the lower socio-economic classes still live secluded lives in Greece. The right of women to seek education and a career is beginning to be recognised, but illiteracy rates for women are much higher than they are for men, particularly amongst the older women.[5] The educational opportunities even for the sons are limited and when girls are needed to help in the home, and can learn all they need to know about homemaking and motherhood from their mothers; parents see little reason for keeping their daughters on at school. Immigrant parents find it even harder to understand why their daughters as well as their sons should return to school when they arrive in Canada, far less why they should be encouraged to go on to take training and have a career.

Sons are traditionally seen as a sign of family strength, future providers for the family and a support for parents in their old age. In addition, if the father dies, his eldest son automatically takes over as head of the family, exercising authority over his younger brothers and sisters. Daughters are lost to their families on marriage and, moreover, are expensive since a dowry has to be found for them. Marriages are in many

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5 In 1961, the illiteracy rate for men in Greece was 9.1%, for women it was 31.5%.

cases still arranged by the parents. Even where Greek parents in Canada do not actively choose a mate for their children, they make it clear that they want them to marry a Greek boy or girl, and the choice must have parental approval.

It may sound as if women in Greece, particularly in rural Greece, play a very subservient role, but it has been suggested by one writer that it is more a case of male and female roles being clearly distinguished, and women are respected for fulfilling their role correctly (Mead, 1955). Women are, however, beginning to emerge from their cloistered existence. The number of women in economic employment has increased steadily since the beginning of this century, and during the war years, many women got jobs in factories and other formerly male strongholds, and if they already had some education, were able to take positions of responsibility. Recognition of their right to take part in public affairs came in 1952, when women got the vote (Antonakaki, 1955).

The status of a woman in Greece increases with marriage, motherhood and age, and the mother is a powerful figure in the home, exacting obedience from her children and taking most of the responsiblity for discipline, appealing only to her husband as the ultimate authority.

As for schooling, boys and girls go to primary school together and learn together, but at the secondary level the sexes are segregated. Boys have a greater chance of continuing their education beyond the compulsory requirement, and of following a career.[6]

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6 In 1957-58, the proportion of girls in primary schools was 48%, 39% in secondary schools, and only 25% in higher education (UNESCO, 1958).

Schools

Is a rural school very different from an urban school?

Life in Athens, and to a lesser extent, in the few other large towns, is very different from the rest of the country. In the golden age of classical Greece, Athens was the city state par excellence; it still appears to be an entity apart from the rest of Greece. By comparison, the standard of living is much higher in Athens, women are more emancipated, the way of life is more sophisticated, and American influences are widespread. In rural areas, time is not important, tomorrow is much the same as today or yesterday, and arriving a few hours late for an appointment is of no consequence. The pace of life in Athens on the other hand is more similar to a North American city than it is to the rest of Greece.

The total percentage of illiteracy in Greece in 1961 was 19.6%,[7] but the rate was nearly twice as high in rural areas as opposed to urban and semi-urban areas,[8] and of those people designated "illiterate" the major proportion are women. Often, what literacy they may have acquired is lost through the lack of an opportunity to use it. There are probably no books in the home, and no library in the village. The men, however, are avid newspaper readers, and politics and current affairs are thrashed out over a drink at the village coffee-house or outdoor cafe. Generally, the only woman to be seen at these places is the female tourist.

There are differences in both quality and quantity between urban and rural schools. For one thing, secondary schools and private schools are almost entirely confined to Athens and a few other provincial centres. This is why many children in rural areas never go to a secondary school, or else they have to travel daily to the nearest centre or even live away

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7 It is less than 1.0% in Canada (Bonnett, Lorelies, & Kyriazios, (1969).

8 Illiteracy rates were 14.5% in urban and semi-urban areas, 26.7% in rural areas (UNESCO, 1958).

from home if the distance is too great. Shortages and inadequacies in equipment are found in urban as well as rural schools, but they are less severe in the towns. There are libraries in the towns, and a television station in Athens. The most fully-equipped schools with the lowest pupil/teacher ratio are the private ones, but only the wealthy few can afford to send their children to these schools, and it seems that even they are poorly equipped compared with the average school in Toronto. Teaching posts in Athenian schools are the most coveted and it has already been said that the best teachers tend to be appointed to them. The improved situation, however, regarding the provision of teachers and equipment is offset by the fact that overcrowding in Athenian schools is an even more severe problem than in rural Greece. The capital city lures ever-increasing numbers of people and its schools are bursting at the seams with as many as 100 pupils in one classroom.

Administration

All schools, whether public or private, rural or urban, follow a common curriculum at both the primary and secondary levels, and are subject to the same supervision and control by area inspectors. Educational administration is under the central control of the Ministry of Education, with responsibility delegated to area inspectors who are assisted by a council of education (UNESCO, 1958). The only basic difference between private and public education in Greece is that public education is free at all stages, and private education is not free except for private technical schools, which are subsidized by the State (Council of Europe, 1965). Most secondary education is in the hands of privately run institutions, so that parents generally have to pay for their children's schooling at this stage.[9]

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9 Over 80% of the secondary school population in 1961 was in privately run institutions (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

Secondary Education

Suppose that our child from rural Greece had relatives living in Athens, and his parents could afford to send him to live with them while he attended a secondary school in the city. He would now be in a minority group and the chances are high that he would enter a gymnasium, the classical secondary general school.[10]

The Gymnasia

Secondary education in Greece has for long been confined almost exclusively to the six-year gymnasia, modelled along the same lines as the German and French classical schools, and dominated by the teaching of classical Greek and ancient history. The prestige attached to this type of education has been, and to a large extent, still is, enormous; only in the last two decades has it come under serious and sustained attack as inadequate and inappropriate for the needs of a modern-day society. Economic growth has been severely hampered by the shortage of technical and vocational schools and colleges, by the lack of qualified personnel for these schools, and by the lack of prestige attached to this type of training.[11] There have been attempts in recent years to upgrade and expand opportunities in technical and vocational education, but the academic training of the gymnasia, originally designed to select civil servants, lawyers, educators and other professional people, is still the hallmark of the "educated man" in Greece. From a practical point of view too, the leaving certificate of the gymnasium is the main avenue of entry into higher education. Greek parents still want

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10 In 1961, 37% of the population in Greece aged 12 to 17 were enrolled in secondary education (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

11 Despite an increase of nearly 65% in enrolments between 1955 and 1961, the number of students in technical and vocational education at the secondary level in Greece was, in relation to the population, the lowest in Europe (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

their children to get into a gymnasium, and see anything else as a poor second-best. This attitude is found among immigrants, and if a child is advised to enter a technical stream or go to a technical school, it may be felt, not just a reflection on the child's intelligence, but a disgrace to the whole family.

In 1961, all but 5% of the secondary school population, armed with their primary school certificate and having passed the secondary school entrance examination, were in one of the gymnasia. There are boys', girls' and co-educational schools; classes in the latter may be segregated. The school year is the same as the primary one, but students attend for an hour longer each day. The year is divided into half-years, with written exams which all students must pass at the end of each half-year. Modern Greek, history, geography, mathematics and physics, religion, singing and gymnastics continue to be compulsory subjects on the student's timetable. To these are now added Latin, classical Greek, philosophy, domestic science for girls and civics for boys, some technical subjects, and a second modern language, which may be either French or English, and French tends to be more popular (UNESCO, 1958). To give some idea of weighting, seven to eight hours a week are devoted to the study of classical Greek, four to modern Greek, one to civics, and one or two to technical or practical subjects (Kazamias, 1967).

This was the situation in the gymnasia before the wave of reforms in the 1950's and 60's, which aimed at freeing the curriculum of the gymnasia from its classical dominance and making it more relevant to the needs of the economy. The General Education Act in 1964 divided the six-year gymnasia into two three-year stages. The first stage was to provide a general education, and it was to be phased into the final stage of compulsory

schooling, extending compulsory education from six to nine years and abolishing the entrance examination at the beginning of this stage. Instead, students would get a leaving certificate at the end of the first stage, which would qualify them for entry into the second stage of the gymnasia, or into technical and vocational schools, or directly into employment in "minor clerical occupations" (Kazamias, 1967, p. 336).

The second stage was to be divided into eight streams, retaining a classical orientation, but introducing and attempting to upgrade vocationally-oriented courses. These streams were:

Classical
Scientific
Technical
Agricultural
Commercial
Nautical
Foreign Languages
Home Economics

All streams were to include ancient and modern Greek, one foreign language, physics, and mathematics as compulsory subjects. All streams were to prepare students either for higher education or for direct employment (Kazamias, 1967).

This was the official intention in 1964, but it is uncertain how far these reforms have been implemented. Changes in government and political upheavals have retarded, and in some cases, changed the direction of educational reform. It is not clear either how the political crisis of 1967 and the emergence of a right-wing military dictatorship has affected education in Greece, although it seems fair to assume that any moves will have been in a less liberal direction. The opinion of several members of the Greek community here was that the situation in education has regressed to the level existing before the 1964 Education Act, which would mean among other

things that no further attempt is being made to extend compulsory schooling from six to nine years.

Technical and Vocational Schools

The provision of technical and vocational education in Greece for the remaining 5% of the secondary school population has been haphazard and almost entirely in the hands of private enterprise, with acute problems of overcrowded classrooms and inadequate equipment of low quality. In such a situation, demonstration by the teacher has been the dominant method, with little opportunity for the students to learn by experience. The low prestige attached to technical schools has also meant that they have attracted mainly children of low-income families who could not afford to pay for their child to continue full-time at school, and attendance was on a part-time basis, mostly in the evening (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

In 1959, various measures were proposed to co-ordinate, expand and improve technical and vocational training. A three-tier system was to be established:

(a) lower vocational schools, one to four years for craftsmen and skilled agricultural workers;

(b) six, three to four-year secondary technical schools for technicians and foremen;

(c) two, four-year higher technical schools for "sub-engineers."

All three levels would provide both general education and technical training. A college for training technical teachers was to be established and all technical and vocational schools were to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (Kazamias, 1967, p. 337). A start had been made, at least on paper, to liberalize technical education and make it respectable, but it is difficult to discover just how far these measures have been implemented.

Any child anywhere in Greece goes to much the same kind of primary school, and education at the primary stage has changed little over the years. Changes and uncertainty as to how far these changes have been put into effect make it difficult to describe accurately the kind of secondary education which our Greek child might have had.

Higher Education

Students who pass the very stiff examinations at the end of six years of secondary schooling and get their academic certificate are eligible to enter higher education. Few are able to do so, however, since the shortage of places in higher education is severe, particularly in technical education.[12] One result of the shortage is a "brain drain" overseas, and in 1961, nearly a quarter of all Greek students in higher education were studying abroad (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965).

There are two universities, at Athens and Salonica,[13] two polytechnical institutes in Athens, a number of technical schools and a number of training colleges for primary teachers. Secondary school graduates intending to take up teaching attend the Faculty of Education at one of the two universities. All higher institutions are public, and although fees are charged, they are low and scholarships are available.

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12 The number of graduates from higher education as a percentage of the population aged 23 was 3.6% (The Mediterranean Regional Project, 1965). In Canada, it was 6.9% in 1959. The figure for Greece is, however, quite high by European standards, for example, it was 2.6% in Italy at the same date, but the proportion of technical graduates in Greece is particularly small.

13 The formation of a third university at Patras was proposed in 1965, but this has to date not been acted upon.

A Final Note

The chances are that if the Greek child sitting in your classroom had remained in Greece, he would have not gone to secondary school. If he had even survived a few years of secondary school he would have been in the minority of the population, and the pride of his family and village. In Greece, like many other European countries, access to the upper reaches of education is narrow. A student needs either money or brains to continue, and it is easier if he has both. Your Greek student is even less likely to come from a background of education; his mother may be barely literate, probably none of his family spoke more than a few words of English when they arrived in Toronto. Here, he finds himself plunged into an education system where education is considered a right rather than a privilege, where teaching methods tend to be much freer and more experimental than he has known, where he is surrounded by a wealth of audio-visual equipment completely outside his previous experience. The period of adjustment can be difficult and bewildering for both the child and his parents.

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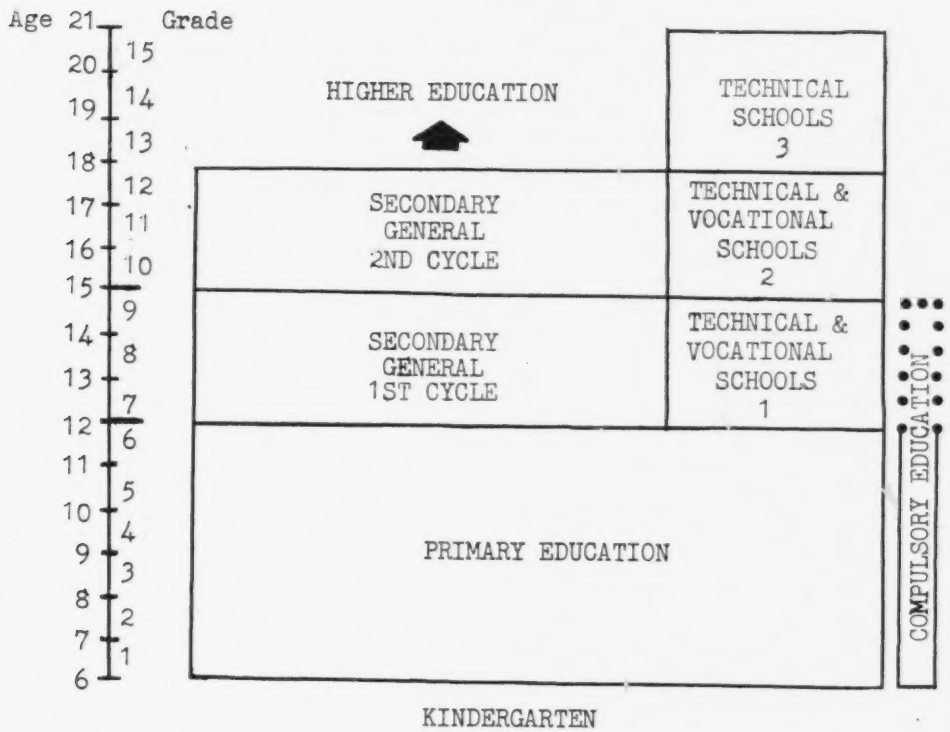
APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

DIAGRAM OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF GREECE*



* Taken from Council of Europe, Council for Cultural Co-operation, 1965.

APPENDIX II

SOME COMPARATIVE FIGURES

Characteristics	Canada	Greece
Population (1966)*	19,271,000	8,510,000
Area Sq. Miles*	3,851,824	51,182
Illiteracy (1968)**	Less than 1%	19.6%
Annual Income Per Capita** $ Canadian (1965)	2,075	651
Distribution of Labour Force (1966)*		
(1) Agriculture	11.2%	54.2%
(2) Industry	33.5%	19.3%
(3) Others	55.3%	26.5%

* NATO Information Service, 1966.

** Bonnett, Lorelies, & Kyriazias. "The Good Earth...Or Is It?" (Article in The Telegram, January 25, 1969).